

VZCZCXRO0834

OO RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHDH RUEHHM RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHMA  
RUEHNEH RUEHPB RUEHPOD RUEHPW RUEHSL RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHNE #0275/01 0420143  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O 110143Z FEB 10  
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9479  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000275

STATE FOR SCA/INSB, EEB/TPP/MTAA/ABT, C-CHUANG AND MPLOWDEN  
USDOC FOR ITA/MAC DAS HVINEYARD  
USDOC FOR 4530/ITA/MAC/OSA/LDROKER/ASTERN  
USDA PASS FAS/OSTA/EPORTER AND FAS/OCRA/FERUS/BEAN/RADLER  
DEPT PASS TO USTR FOR SOUTH ASIA-MDELANEY/CLILIEINFELD/AADLER  
DEPT PASS TO TREASURY FOR OFFICE OF SOUTH ASIA - MNUGENT/WFOSTER  
TREASURY PASS TO FRB SAN FRANCISCO/TERESA CURRAN

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [TBIO](#) [EAID](#) [ECIN](#) [EINV](#) [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT SAYS NOT YET TO GM EGGPLANT "IN  
THE PUBLIC AND NATIONAL INTEREST"

REF: A. 09 CHENNAI 0343

[1](#)B. 10 CHENNAI 0030

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: On February 9, Minister of Environment and Forests  
Jairam Ramesh announced his final decision regarding the commercial  
approval of genetically modified (GM) eggplant, or Bt brinjal, in  
India. With a long and emotional charged justification, the  
Minister declared that a moratorium is needed on Bt brinjal in India  
until the government regulatory system ensures safety on the human  
side, mainly through long-term scientific studies. The decision is  
a huge set-back for the development and marketing of GM food crops  
in India, as well as in other developing countries. Minister Ramesh  
hit two key themes in his decision: questioning the government's own  
regulatory system and invoking the fear of Monsanto's domination of  
Indian agriculture. Immediate reaction from both scientists and  
industry to the Minister's decision indicates further commercial  
release timelines of GM crops in India -- not just eggplant -- could  
be set back by five to ten years. Ramesh's decision shows that the  
politics of "GMOs" trump science and farmer interests. End  
Summary.

Must Balance Science and Society...

[1](#)2. (U) India's Minister of Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh,  
held numerous public consultations in both pro-and-con GM states  
prior to taking a central government decision on whether or not to  
allow the commercial release of a GM eggplant, known as Bt brinjal  
to most Indians, in India. In October 2009, his own Ministry's  
Genetic Engineering Approval Committee recommended that Bt brinjal  
was safe for environmental release and recommended commercial  
approval of the crop to the central government. The hue and cry of  
opponents led Ramesh to take matters into his own hands and make his  
own Ministerial assessment after conducting a series of public  
consultations with the stakeholders. In his 19-page decision note,  
Ramesh acknowledges that "strong views have been expressed on the Bt  
brinjal both for and against." Ramesh goes on to state that over  
8,000 people from different sections of society attended his seven  
public meetings. Further, he quotes farmers and 'serious minded'  
NGOs as well as numerous email exchanges with eminent scientists  
around the world as justification for the moratorium on the  
commercial release of Bt brinjal.

...with Center and State

13. (U) In the Minister's report, he writes "All states which have written to me expressed apprehension on Bt-brinjal and have called for extreme caution." Ramesh consulted with Indian state leaders, particularly the major eggplant producing states of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, in addition to holding town hall meetings in Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Nagpur, Chandigarh, Bangalore and Hyderabad. Even prior to the Ministry of Environment's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee's (GEAC) October 2009 decision to approve Bt brinjal (reftel A), the Communist Party of India had already announced it was in favor of an outright ban on genetically modified (GM) foods and crop development.

Why Bt Brinjal?

14. (U) The product in question is a GM eggplant developed by the Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company (an Indian seed company known as Mahyco, which is 26 percent owned by Monsanto), Tamil Nadu Agriculture University (TNAU), and the University of Agriculture Sciences (UAS) Dharwad, using a trait from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) bacterium (cry1Ac, a genetic event, which was developed by Monsanto) that makes the eggplant resistant to the fruit and shoot borer, a common insect pest. USAID, through its Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project II (ABSP II) led by Cornell University, which works in partnership with the Government of India's Department of Biotechnology (DBT), the Indian Institute of Vegetable Research, TNAU, and UAS, Dharwad, has been supporting the work on Bt brinjal for six years.

15. (U) Eggplant is an important common man's vegetable in India, grown in about 566,000 hectares with annual production of around 9.6

NEW DELHI 00000275 002 OF 004

million tons. It accounts for 8.3 percent of the production and 7.6 percent of the area under vegetable crops, and is grown by an estimated 1.4 million small and marginal farmers. Despite being the poor man's crop, eggplant is popularly called the 'King of Vegetables' and featured in the dishes of many households in India. The crop is grown all across India with the major producing states being West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Gujarat.

16. (U) Eggplant cultivation is extremely input-intensive (insecticides), as the crop is very prone to insect pests, particularly the fruit and shoot borer. Fruit damage as high as 95 percent and losses up to 70 percent have been reported by Indian farmers. Consequently, farmers resort to frequent insecticide applications and biological control measures, resulting in high costs of cultivation, negative effects on the environment and serious risk to consumer health and safety. Efforts to develop pest-resistant conventional plants through traditional breeding have met with almost no success. Approval of Bt eggplant for commercial cultivation would have improved Indian farmer incomes, lowered pesticide use and reduced significant crop losses, thus helping to address in part India's food security concerns.

Ramesh Questions the  
Regulatory System

17. (U) Minister Ramesh expressed concerns regarding the doubts raised related to the integrity of the GEAC process, specifically, the adequacy of the testing procedures for assessing human and environmental safety, along with the reliability of the tests carried out by the developers of the Bt brinjal themselves. The Minister suggested that the existing Indian regulatory system for GM crops and food was not able to conduct its own tests on new products. Thus, new approvals should wait until the government itself has the capacity to test. Citing the science provided (i.e. the 'new' genetic event Cry1Ac) as being sourced from the multi-national Monsanto, Ramesh's decision stated: "Very serious fears have been raised in many quarters on the possibility of Monsanto controlling our food chain." The Minister then continues, stating "I have no bias whatsoever" and cites Monsanto's substantial investments in India. In the end, the Minister highlights the perceived lack of local, indigenous competition to Monsanto as a

primary concern.

¶8. (U) While Ramesh drew a clear distinction between his decision to place a moratorium on the release of Bt eggplant and other ongoing GM crop research, some scientists claim this landmark decision will be all encompassing. Ramesh noted that even most experts wanted more studies on the long-term effects of genetically modified food crops.

#### U.S. Scientists Cited

-----

¶9. (SBU) Minister Ramesh extensively highlighted concerns raised about Bt brinjal by international scientists, especially those from the U.S. Of the eight scientists quoted directly in his brief, Ramesh highlighted 'write-in' advice from four U.S. institutions: Ohio State University, the U.S. Union of Concerned Scientists, the University of Minnesota and the Salk Institute of Biological Studies. Ramesh did not appear to use EU studies as the basis for his decision.

#### India's Father of the Green Revolution Weighs In

-----

¶10. (SBU) Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, winner of the World Food Prize and considered to be India's equivalent to Dr. Norman Borlaug, urged Minister Ramesh to show caution and take two critical steps: 1) conserve India's genetic heritage in brinjal and 2) assess the chronic effects of consumption of Bt brinjal. Dr. Swaminathan's appeal to the Minister compared the need for long-term studies on the consumption of Bt brinjal to the studies carried out on the impact of tobacco smoking relative to the incidence of lung cancer in humans. (Note: The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation has an ongoing biotech research program studying abiotic stress tolerance

NEW DELHI 00000275 003 OF 004

in rice. Limited field trials of transgenic rice varieties containing 'salinity' tolerant mangrove genes have been undertaken. Some related patents have been filed; however, there have been limited efforts for its regulatory and commercial approval. While Dr. Swaminathan has been historically in favor of agricultural biotechnology, he recently expressed strong reservations against research and development on labor displacing biotech events, such as herbicide tolerance in crops. He has also voiced concerns of multi-national firms taking over the seed industry in India. End Note.)

#### Ag Minister Speaks Up; Then Goes Silent

-----

¶11. (U) Minister Ramesh's initial decision to review the GEAC recommendation through public consultations was questioned by several of his ministerial colleagues. Minister of Agriculture Sharad Pawar said that Bt brinjal has been found safe for human consumption and environmental release by the GEAC after a thorough scientific review and testing and hence, should be approved. The State Minister of Agriculture K.V. Thomas publicly refuted allegations against the safety of Bt brinjal alleging it to be an 'anti-MNC' propaganda campaign. The Minister of Science and Technology Prithviraj Chavan, who oversees the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), also said that Bt brinjal has been adequately tested and found safe by the GEAC. Lately, there have been no public statements from Minister Pawar or his colleagues, possibly due to strong media hype generated by anti-GM groups at the various public consultations and opposing voices from several state governments.

¶12. (U) Since Minister Ramesh's announcement, there has been no official comment from the Minister of Agriculture or the Minister of Science and Technology. Nevertheless, a senior official from the Indian Council of Agriculture Research vocally opposed Minister Ramesh's decision during a television debate on February 9, alleging that the decision was not based on sound science, but on public opinion.

Ahluwalia: Minister Ramesh Failed  
to Make the "Elementary Arguments"

-----

¶13. (SBU) Science and Technology Advisor Dr. Nina Fedoroff met with Montek Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, immediately prior to Minister Ramesh's announcement on February 9. Referring to Minister Ramesh's town hall meetings, Ahluwalia said that a democracy like India needed to hold consultations with the public on such an important issue, but he was concerned that the debate had been rather one-sided. He noted that many of the non-government organizations (NGOs) in India protesting Bt brinjal were in fact closely associated with and funded by European NGOs. He also remarked on the absence of any scientific voices in the "public debate." Ahluwalia indicated that Minister Ramesh, among other GOI officials, had failed to make the "elementary arguments" about why GM products are safe, and commented that it was not clear if Indian opposition resulted more from process issues and paperwork delays or ideological feelings. Ahluwalia added that he considered the town hall meetings to be okay as a process, but in the end, he felt it would be a major setback if Minister Ramesh were to allow what was essentially a one-sided debate to cause a decision against commercialization of Bt brinjal.

Where Next with Bt Brinjal?

-----

¶14. (SBU) Minister Ramesh set no timeline for lifting the moratorium on Bt brinjal release. Instead, he stated that the 'ban' should remain until independent scientific studies establish, to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals, the safety of the product from the point of view of its long-term impact on human health and the environment, including the genetic diversity of existing varieties of Indian brinjal.

¶15. (SBU) Senior scientists participating on February 10 in a small DBT-sponsored symposium on agricultural and biotechnology were

NEW DELHI 00000275 004.2 OF 004

stunned and very emotional over the announcement. There were rumblings of appealing to the Prime Minister or the Planning Commission for a revised ruling, and threats to go public on what they considered to be an issue of popular politics unfairly trumping science. (Note: it is unclear if this is bravado caused by the initial shock of the announcement, or if there is real momentum to take action. End Note.) Further, public sector scientists from across the government spectrum of institutes are aware that they 'failed' in the eyes of the common man to translate the benefits of this new technology ahead of the Bt brinjal debate.

Many Steps Back

-----

¶16. (SBU) Comment: Overall, the pervasive feeling is that a great deal of time and money was lost, public opinion has soured and Indian scientists are discouraged. While the Minister of Agriculture and Minister of Science and Technology may not oppose the decision publicly, some observers believe that there may be an intense power struggle between the four ministries most involved in agriculture biotechnology - Agriculture, Environment and Forests, Health and Science. On a potentially positive note, Minister Ramesh's focus on the lack of an independent authority may eventually pave the way for early establishment of the long-proposed independent regulatory authority - a Biotech Regulatory Authority of India. Nevertheless, the approval of Bt brinjal is pushed back by at least two to three years, and overall public sentiment is now set against GM foods. Industry and government scientists fear the Ramesh decision may also have a significant impact on approval timelines (perhaps a five to ten year delay) of GM crops which are currently in the pipeline for approval, such as Bt rice, Bt maize, GM tomato, etc.

¶17. (SBU) The decision on the commercial release of Bt brinjal may potentially have a regional impact as trials are also at advanced stages in Bangladesh and the Philippines. Vijay Raghavan, South

Asia Regional In-charge of the USAID-funded ABSP-II, who is working to develop Bt brinjal in three different countries, said that Bangladesh and the Philippines have been looking to India as a leader as they do not have the capacity for full-line evaluation of B t brinjal. Thus, India's decision may have a significant regional impact regarding all GM crops. End comment.

ROEMER